

Review of Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean *The Queen's Men and Their Plays*
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)

Francis Bacon observed that some minds focus upon the differences between things and others upon the likenesses, but mental predisposition alone does not explain the current dominance of the particularizing over the generalizing tendency in early modern theatre studies. The Wanamaker Globe reconstruction embodies the principle that a particular playhouse is worth distinguishing from its close relatives, and McMillin and MacLean likewise assert that each of the period's playing companies must be studied "with an eye for its own special characteristics" (p. xii). Had Gerald Eades Bentley the new evidence gathered by the Records of Early English Drama (REED) project, upon which much of this book depends, he probably would have gone beyond generalizing about 'The Profession of Player' too.

McMillin and MacLean's thesis is that the Queen's men company was formed in 1583 with a specific mission to tour the land in the monarch's name, bringing to outlying areas dramatic representations which promoted national unity. Touring the north, especially Lancashire, was less profitable than touring the south, and the company's political mandate helps explain the attention they paid to these areas where Catholic recusancy threatened national security (p. 56-9). We perhaps too easily think of Elizabethan puritanism as inherently anti-theatrical, but here is a useful reminder that the first phase of reformation "used art, drama, and music as methods of propaganda", and that only from the mid 1570s did the radical wing of the movement reject these cultural forms out of hand (p. 30). For the puritans Walsingham, Leicester, and Knollys on the privy council, anti-theatricalism was dangerous not so much because the queen liked to watch plays--although she certainly did--but because it threatened to detach the reform movement from mainstream English culture. Leicester was already a keen patron of his own theatrical troupe which had been granted in 1574 an extraordinary royal patent to tour without hindrance. McMillin and MacLean offer convincing evidence that this company was effectively transformed into the Queen's men when Leicester and Walsingham perceived the desirability of putting the Queen's name to such an project.

The Records of Early English Drama project provided much of the painstaking evidence which substantiates this argument, but this book's thorough reappraisal of the Queen's men's extant plays--properly considered as a group for the first time--makes it utterly compelling. What kind of drama could serve the political agenda of puritan privy councillors? Under the heading 'Truth and Plainness Staged', McMillin and MacLean explore how the Queen's men's narrative plots, staging practices, and verse styles served propagandist ends. Robert Wilson's *Three Lords and Three Ladies of London* depicts Pleasure, Pomp, and Policy encouraging patriotic entertainments to rally the nation in preparation for the Spanish Armada, which "amounts to calling the puritan extremists who opposed such festivities unpatriotic" (p. 33).

Apart from contemporary politics, the narrative resource most useful for this kind of drama was the English history becoming available in easily assimilated prose chronicles. In the 1580s and early 1590s the Queen's men established this most vital of early modern dramatic genres. The deeds of heroic Englishmen might be told plainly and truly (as the plays' titlepages often assert), but McMillin and MacLean detect a

subtlety in the dramaturgy which has hitherto gone unnoticed. A stage booth like the one used to represent a royal chamber in The Famous Victories of Henry V is used for Bacon's cell in Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay, and this is appropriate because "The goings-on in Bacon's cell are a parody of court power. . . ." When Prince Edward visits the cell, Bacon

sets up a sort of early television set, which allows those in the cell to see what is happening in Fressingfield. Since what is happening in Fressingfield is acted out on another part of the stage, the conventions of simultaneous setting are being put into action as a product of Bacon's magic. (p. 141)

We have come a long way since E. K. Chambers characterized simultaneous staging as an old-fashioned method stretched beyond breaking point by "the taste of an English audience for romantic or historical drama" (Elizabethan Stage, Oxford, 1923, 3:70) in which many geographically-dispersed places had to be represented in rapid succession. The apparently clumsy device of narrating the plot becomes, in McMillin and MacLean's reading, a sophisticated reflection upon the power of words to initiate deeds. In The True Tragedy of Richard III a Page describes in detail the arrest of Hastings in the council chamber, and

. . . each item of the plan is enacted as the Page names it, so that his narration is co-ordinated with a mime of the ruffians gathering onstage, hearing their signal and breaking into the Court (offstage), and then re-entering (as 'others') with Hastings in their grasp. The staging suggests the slickness of Richard's machinery. Committing the act is no more difficult than the Page's naming of it, and there is no delay. The well-oiled machine works quietly, and there is no place it cannot reach. (p. 132)

Commentary of this quality sends the reader back to the plays with a renewed eagerness to keep the dynamics of stage performance in mind.

The Queen's men established the history play genre, but their rivals the Admiral's men and the Chamberlain's men excelled at it. Acknowledging that the Queen's men effectively lost the London market to the state-enforced duopoly of 1594, McMillin and MacLean make a New Historical virtue of their necessity by insisting that we must study the margins to understand the centre. Such justification sounds a little apologetic and is unnecessary since this book adds weight to the growing consensus that we have long overstated the marginality of provincial drama.

McMillin and MacLean save the discussion of the relationship between the Queen's men and Marlowe and Shakespeare until the end of their book, as though it were an indulgent dessert earned by those who got through the nutritious but dull main course. In fact, this substantial work of meticulous and inspired scholarship needs no justifying nexus with Shakespeare. McMillin and MacLean have convincingly demonstrated the validity of their premise that a particularizing study of one early modern playing company can substantially alter our perception of the entire tradition.

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